



Christopher Wool. *Untitled*, 2006.

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

Painting with Its Own Megaphone

Two critics of opposing viewpoints, discussing a controversial painter:

1ST CRITIC: His work is like a car with the engine taken out, but it runs anyway.

2ND CRITIC: That's because people like you pick it up and carry it.

This verbatim dialogue, which appeared in a story by Veronica Geng, was actually in reference to my own work, but it could just as easily apply to the work of Christopher Wool, who, though he emerged a bit later, is close to my age. Could it be a generational thing? I don't know about the second part, but the first part is true enough: Wool's pictures run like a stripped-down racer.

It's a mistake to ask a work of art to be all things to all people; the question is how little we can ask of art and still have it fill the space of our longings. By which I mean a state of open awareness like a gravitational field that pulls other things into itself and, in turn, releases quantities of unaccounted-for emotion into the light of day. That is, of course, only one kind of art. Another kind operates more like criti-

cism itself, in which the artist takes up and defends a certain position, and tries to convince us, as Edmund Wilson describes the critic's role, "by the superior power of his argument." The first type is vulnerable; the second tries to limit the artist's exposure to that vulnerability. It's cool—almost by definition if not intent. Black leather jacket cool. This is the type of art Christopher Wool makes—or made, that is, until, apparently, he experienced an epiphanic conversion: the kind that turns the artist into a believer of sorts—less defended, and open to life's indeterminacy.

For most of the '80s, Wool made words—how they sound as well how they look—the primary element of his visual style. Simple phrases or single words were rendered as brutalist, sans serif black letters on white grounds. The letters have the look of enlarged stencils and give the appearance of having been painted quickly, much the way Franz Kline's black-and-white paintings look "fast" but were, in fact, painstakingly produced.

WORDS—long, *long* history in modern art. Picasso and Braque, of course; Picabia, even Gerald Murphy; the whole of Russian constructivism; on to the Americans: Stuart Davis and the precisionists; onward to Rauschenberg and that great stenciler, Jasper Johns, followed closely by Warhol and Ruscha (both former graphic artists); to the more philosophical wordsmiths like Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, and Bruce Nauman, after which the baton passed to the more literary Jean-Michel Basquiat. Every generation since 1910 has its exemplars. So already full is this lineage that an artist starting out might have thought twice before planting a flag in that terrain. But a good artist often has the instincts of a gambler, and against these steep odds, Christopher Wool blithely doubled down, Lucky Pierre style, excluding everything from his paintings *but* typography.

Like a few of his forebears, Nauman most importantly, Wool aligned the act of looking with that of reading; to look is to read, and back again.

But that's not quite it. The experience of a Wool painting starts with reading but is more like being read to; as we look, a voice other than one's own intrudes. Wool's paintings directly address the viewer: to look is to be harangued; these paintings come with their own megaphone. The *New Yorker* cartoon version would have a small man standing in front of a Wool painting meekly pointing to himself with the caption "Who, me?" Their tone is declarative, often accusatory. Wool's paintings have something in common with certain radical works of the theater; their closest stylistic relative is Peter Handke's ravishing indictment of bourgeois mendacity, *Offending the Audience*.

Black enamel letters pushed to the edges of white grounds: the paintings are highly energized and, with so few elements, handsome and elegantly resolved. RUN DOG RUN, HELTER SKELTER, and the iconic, SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE WIFE SELL THE KIDS—phrases pulled from the popular unconscious. Wool's painted words enact as well the fraternal comingling, and at times struggle, between painting and printing—which, as much as words themselves, has been a highly rewarding subject for much art of the last hundred years. Where does one stop and the other begin? Though cool and dry, there is a rewarding physicality to these pictures, a painterliness that derives in part from a feeling for scale and proportion; Wool makes lovely shaped rectangles. You might think this to be so elementary as to not warrant notice, but try it—it's harder than it looks. He is a master of scale as well as gesture and rhythm, three elements that establish an intuitive connection with the act of painting. Through a combination of that intuited grace and critical intelligence, Wool has invented a most ingenious type of painting machine in which the process and the image that result are reciprocal; the image defines the terms of its own making with such overwhelming conviction that, when it's working smoothly, you feel some of what you get from a Pollock—the near-impossibility of making a mistake.

Though visually as well as literally expansive, their surfaces covered with spilt, propulsed images, Wool's paintings hew to a narrow bandwidth. His color is restricted to black, white, and gray, with the occasional red or orange. I'm reminded of how rock 'n' roll songs recycle the same slender means: three, maybe four chords, a plaintive lyric repeated over and over in strict 4/4 time. It may not be much compared to Hindemith, but the sound of an electric guitar played rhythmically can be so riveting that it's the only thing you want to hear.

A spirit of childish refusal runs through the center of the avant-garde impulse; in adults it's called resistance. *No, I won't use color; I won't make beautiful things; I won't entertain.* There are reasons for the lasting appeal of this negation, which stem from the art world's love affair with a utopian vision. It is partly the Bauhaus legacy—banish ornament, and sentimentality will follow it out the door—and is also a desire for art to get in front of its complex relationship with mechanization. Into this long history of how to make painting matter in the mechanical, and now digital, age, Wool's paintings appeared as naturally as the butterfly from the caterpillar.

An artist sometimes has to make a sharp turn in order to go straight ahead. I'm reminded of a story about the young Frank Stella, who initially wished to paint like Velázquez but, since that was not within his ability, opted for black stripes instead. The stripes were his Velázquez. Let me explain the connection. Some years ago, I visited the Courbet retrospective at the Met: paintings of stunning breadth and heft, all sinewy, lean, oxygenated muscle; paintings like the tremendous nights with one's first real love, the feeling that everything is possible, nothing shall be withheld. Ahhh . . . this is painting! In one of the last rooms hung three enormous paintings of hunted stags—stand-ins for the artist himself—caught in the agonized throes of death. These paintings stop you in your tracks—that is, if you don't laugh out loud at their wounded grandiosity. As I rounded the cor-

ner, I was momentarily surprised to see Christopher there, too, as I wouldn't have thought him susceptible to such high-purposed melodrama. In that moment I realized that his work is also the dying stag, that he reaches for the same talismanic power to enchant, to confront head-on whatever representation of the sublime the culture will accept. It just looks different today.

I can't say what, if anything, precipitated the shift, but sometime around the start of the new century, Christopher Wool entered a phase of such expansiveness and expressivity that it was hard to find the continuity with his earlier work; he no longer engaged with words as such, but with the language of abstract painting. Just as Peter Handke himself evolved from enfant terrible to elegiac memoirist, seemingly all at once Wool started making paintings full of complexity and ambiguity with the feel of high modernism, once removed. It was as if, from one show to the next, this *sandwich-board writer* commenced his version of *The Waste Land*. Wool seemed to open up everything about the way he makes a painting, engaging with a number of formal elements that exponentially complicate the pictorial space. The result is a kind of picture that is less tethered to the artist's intention; you still strongly feel the artist's presence, but now there is more room for the viewer's eye—and mind—to roam. These paintings ask, and risk, a lot; they're still cool, but only just. Wool's paintings show that "cool" works best when it's a matter of temperament, not a strategy. In addition to the industrial silk screen, two important elements entered Wool's painting vocabulary around this time: freehand lines made with a spray gun, and its opposite formal trope, Ben-Day dots—the pattern that makes half-tones reproducible on a printed page. The dot pattern, so graphically seductive, like a magic ingredient, is to painting what anchovy reduction is to cooking: it deepens the relationship of all the other flavors. The visual combinations made available by these new elements and procedures, laid as they were on top of the

rigorous formal terms of engagement established in his earlier work, unleashed one of the most prolific and visually rewarding periods in recent memory.

Christopher Wool is a doggedly urban painter. Some of the paintings of the early and mid-2000s have de Kooning's late figures in the landscape as their understructure; one even has a de-Kooning-esque title, *Woman on a Bicycle*. But in Wool's hands, the exuberantly watery colorations come out as variations on gray, white, and black. And not the elegant grays of Jasper Johns, but the way Chinatown looks in the rain: the thin, chalky grays of faded signs for parking lots, yesterday's newspaper blowing in the gutter, or the look of a car windshield that's been wiped by a squeegee guy.

In this second phase, Wool became a painter of erasure. Looking at a recent painting, which arrives at its fullness through an accumulation of removals, additions, erasures, spray-painted lines, sweeping gestural wipes, overprintings, and other procedures, it's very difficult to tell what is first layer and what is last, what is painted and what is printed. From time to time the ingredients don't gel, with the result that we can see a little too much behind the curtain; and, although I can tell you which pictures I find affectless, I can't tell you why they fail. Many, if not most, of the pictures have tremendous verve and gravitas; they anchor the wall with the conviction of classical abstract art, and their feeling for rhythm, weight, and balance, the specific velocity of gestures and marks, a meandering line on top of a purposeful back-and-forth full-arm scrub, is highly energized and fully first-rate. They embody much of what abstract painting can aspire to at this moment. Wool's pictures have a pleasantly confusing, shmushed-up feeling, and the different colors of gray and silver and red are lyrical and beautiful; they're structured/vaporous and ironic/sincere in a way that is circular, declarative, and open-ended all at once. Wool's paintings don't easily yield to formal analysis; they work

largely due to the artist's conviction, his belief in the stripped-down means he has chosen. Of course, all artists believe that what they are doing is meaningful, but there are different depths of belief tied to different levels of talent. Wool's pictures have an "it was all a mistake but what the hell" kind of quality—cheerily nihilistic. He has the great gift of knowing when to stop.

